FRAMING PETER NEILSON

In a typical Peter Neilson painting, there is a series of rooms or spaces, in each of which a different scene or scenario takes place. A man smokes a cigar alone in a bar. A women in a red evening dress strides down some stairs. A busker plays a guitar in a railway underpass. The various scenes are linked magically, illogically, across great jumps of scale and perspective. A door opening up at the back of one space reveals a much larger interior space. The glass of a picture frame reflects a world that exists nowhere in reality. Curtains part on a stage to reveal an immense night sky. Connecting these spaces are strangely tilted staircases, beams of torchlight cutting through the dark, pencils that point suggestively and confetti that hangs in the air. Through their recessed depths, birds and miniaturised helicopters fly. And the whole space of the painting is bathed in a deep aquamarine light, which stains everything it touches.

Of course, the inescapable reference in all of this is film noir: lights shining on rain-slicked streets, neon signs, raking shadows, men and women sitting in evening dress in seedy bars, mysterious assignations in hotel lobbies. It is a dream-like, haunted world that Neilson constructs, full of half-remembered ghosts and spectres. They are almost (the barfly, the spy, the femme fatale) the undead stereotypes of our culture – and Neilson paints them with just enough detail to animate but not to individualise them. We look at his pictures as if separated from them by time and space: the figures in them appears appear shrunken as though seen from far away and waver and flicker as though about to disappear. They are plainly unreal, existing only within the strict limits of Neilson's artistic universe, like fish swimming in an aquarium.

This was perhaps the great lesson Neilson learnt during his long 20-year absence from painting. If we compare the works from 1987 on to those of his first acclaimed show as a 23 year old in 1967, the only thing that distinguishes them is the addition of a frame. When Neilson speaks of the way that after his first exhibition he worried about whether he was "using photography as a scapegoat for his inability to draw", we would say that this is not just an individual concern but a general cultural attitude towards the continued possibility of figurative painting. And Neilson in response to this, whether consciously or not, came to the same conclusion as arguably the greatest of 20th-century figurative painters, Edward Hopper, which is that it is necessary to add an imaginary frame around or inside the work. It is to admit that what we see in a figurative painting is not real but merely a representation standing in for the real. The frame, in cutting out or excerpting what we see from reality, precisely allows us to fantasise about it: in a paradoxical way, it is not so much what is outside as what is inside the frame that is seen as though it is missing.

Like Hopper, with Neilson we would note not only the generally cinematic feel of his compositions, but more particularly the series of camera-like framings that run throughout his work. Just as Hopper often viewed his figures thorough windows (whether actual or implied), so in Neilson we have a whole series of doorways, picture frames and televisions screens that distinguish the various tableaux played out in his pictures. In this Neilson doubtless means to emphasise the unreal or even phantasmagorical nature of what he stages. It is their framing more than any actual content that gives them the effect of a kind of dream or fantasy. And yet, somewhat surprisingly, the titles of Neilson's paintings often hint at a kind of social "reality", or

even the possibility of a "political" reading of the work: *History rising… to claim us all* (2000), *The dissenter* (2003), *Wheels in motion, hearts on fire (the battle outside's still raging)* (2004-5). What is going on here? In fact, if we look closely at Neilson's paintings, we will notice that at the back of their fantasmatic settings we often have the invocation of some kind of reality. Through their rear windows or outside their balconies, we see a distant city on fire or being blown up, a squadron of helicopters choppering in, a harshly-lit pair of cleaners removing the previous day's rubbish so that the new day can begin again…

Neilson is not doing anything so obvious as contrasting dream and reality here, criticising the irresponsibility of daydreams in urging us to pay more attention to life. He very well knows that, if we were to seek to make direct contact with reality like this, we would end up seeing it in the same unreal, phantasmatic terms as he depicts in his paintings. Rather, in a brilliant kind of "mousetrap", he is pointing to the fact that it is exactly in dreams that we encounter what must be excluded to allow the dream-like nature of reality. Just as the truth in theatre is not to be revealed immediately but only in the form of a play within a play, so Neilson is saying that the real in art is not directly to be represented but only by means of the frame within the frame. The real is not outside of the frame but is, on the contrary, indicated by a certain doubling or splitting of the frame. It is that which, in being framed by the painting, ends up framing it.

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